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R.F. Kuang on her new book, and life after *Yellowface*

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A kind word Student volunteers with a patient at Pallium India in Thiruvananthapuram; and (below) at the Institute of Palliative Medicine in Kozhikode. (NIRMAL HARINDRAN, K. RAGESH)

THE EMPATHY EFFECT

HOW KERALA'S YOUNG ARE STEPPING UP

Across the State, students are training as palliative caregivers and offering support and comfort to the aged and terminally ill, fostering a culture of care

Reshmi Chakraborty

In 2023, when Aadhil Shah joined ACE College of Engineering in Thiruvananthapuram, he imagined a fair bit of hostel fun, not weekends spent mopping floors. Now, as a palliative care volunteer, he has done everything from delivering medicines to helping elderly patients move homes. He doesn't mind the work. "Volunteering was a sort of fulfilment that came unexpected," says the 20-year-old who loves watching movies in his free time or hanging out with his hostel friends.

IT trainer Nihala Kathoon C.K. too began volunteering at 18, soon after joining college in Kozhikode. "Initially, I helped with fundraising and awareness events. Gradually, I began assisting with patient care and mentoring new volunteers. It soon became a part of my life," says the now 25-year-old.

Caregiving can be tiring and thankless – not something we usually associate with youngsters in today's world of AI tools and Instagram reels. Yet in Kerala, a quiet culture of students tending to the elderly and terminally ill as palliative care volunteers has taken root over the last decade, aided by local community and voluntary organisations, and by collaborations with palliative care institutions.

"Youth involvement has been a part of Kerala's palliative care culture for the last 15 years or so," says Dr. M.R. Rajagopal, a palliative care pioneer and founder of the non-profit, Pallium India. What began as a community-led initiative has now found official recognition. In September 2024, the Kerala government formally encouraged student involvement as was proposed in the revised state palliative care policy in 2019 after advocacy by palliative care groups. In June this year, the state announced a tech-enabled Universal Palliative Care Project integrating NGOs, volunteers, nurses, and institutions providing palliative care in real time.

Kerala has over 1,400 palliative care units. According to 2022 data by Pallium India, there were over 4,000 trained volunteers across ages in the state. The state's newly formed Universal Palliative Care portal is said to have registered almost 8,000 volunteers, according to news reports in July 2025.

Fulfilling a need

Palliative care is not just for the terminally ill, clarifies Dr. Mathews Numpeli, medical officer for Kerala's Universal Palliative Care Project. "In Kerala, palliative care is about supporting people suffering from serious health issues or any chronic ailment – whether from cancer, stroke, liver disease, neuromuscular disorders, mental illnesses or childhood illnesses. It is about providing any kind of support – medical, nursing or psychosocial – that patients and their families need. And in the last 5-10 years, we have been conducting weeks-long training programmes in schools and colleges. Training young people gives them the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to this care," says Dr. Numpeli.

An estimated 5.4 million people in India need palliative care each year. According to a new study by Delhi non-profit Sankala Foundation, in 10 years, one in four people in Kerala will be over 60. Age-friendly care-planning is no longer optional.

Kerala's unique community movement in palliative care began in 1993, when Dr. Rajagopal and Dr. Suresh Kumar of the Institute of Palliative Medicine (IPM) in Kozhikode launched a pain relief clinic for terminally-ill cancer patients. Over time, through the community-owned, volunteer-driven Neighbourhood Network in Palliative Care model, this effort has expanded across the state, aided by its 2008 palliative care policy which mandated that local bodies set up palliative care services. Supported by doctors and nurses, the volunteers – including students – have aimed to improve quality of life for the ailing and their caregivers. The updated state palliative care policy of 2019 proposed specialised training for students in schools and colleges. They are also exposed to the initiative through youth platforms such as Students in Palliative Care (SIPC) that help in mobilising large numbers of participants for awareness programmes, fundraising, and direct patient care support. Training and WHO-aligned certifications often make volunteering a peer-led, structured activity for interested students and many have grown up seeing communities around them doing it.

While volunteering for palliative care does happen in other states, and some like Karnataka and Maharashtra have a palliative care policy, student involvement is sporadic and not structured or ongoing as it is in many parts of Kerala. Schools and colleges in Kerala have been working with palliative care non-profits through NSS (National Service Scheme) and NCC (National Cadet Corps) units. This is how the seeds for the state's unique culture of young people volunteering for palliative care have been sown. "It could be a combination of literacy, school enrolment, an ageing society, and the fact that the community movement started here," says Dr. Rajagopal.

A social approach

What also works is that in Kerala, palliative care didn't emerge as a purely medical issue. "It was seen as a social concern with medical needs," says Dr. Hari Mohan, veteran oncologist and palliative care practitioner. Scouts and guides, and other schoolchildren regularly visit his clinic. "Awareness is huge even at the high school level," he says.

What this initiative does is teach compassion early in a highly individualistic world. As one volunteer puts it, the culture of care is a big part of people's way of life in Kerala because of strong local community involvement. For instance, in many places across the state, families cook and supply food as *pothichoru* (food parcels) to thousands of patients and bystanders in government hospitals via a network of voluntary organisations.

"There's a very active palliative care culture in North Malabar where I come from," says Benna Fathima, 25, a research scholar at Ashoka University in Sonipat. She began as a teenager, tagging along with her mother, a *panchayat* member, and her brother who was already a volunteer. "We clean homes, help with daily tasks, or just spend time with patients. Care isn't just biomedical here, it's deeply social," she says.

This social side of care is on full display at Curios, IPM's annual carnival that draws over 20,000 visitors. Meant to raise awareness and funds for palliative care, it feels like a college festival – with calligraphy workshops, music, food stalls and colourful streamers across its verdant green campus. Volunteers take patients around in wheelchairs to mingle with the crowd and there is much camaraderie and laughter.

"Youth involvement has been a cornerstone of our approach," says Saif Mohammed, consultant and faculty member at IPM. Since 2010, its SIPC programme has brought together over 10,000 volunteers via awareness sessions in colleges. Members agree that the youth bring in new energy and different ideas. "Those genuinely interested get trained, and choose how to get involved – in patient care, community awareness or fundraising. And what students do with the training often goes beyond what we could plan or imagine," says Mohammed.

Nihala Kathoon is one of those students. The Kozhikode resident started by organising activities, gradually moving on to working with patients, a track many students take. One memory stays vivid in her mind. "There was an 18-year-old girl admitted here with cancer. During Curios 2023, we performed Oppana, a traditional Muslim dance from this region, where one performer plays the bride. This girl insisted on being the bride and was thrilled to get that opportunity, often checking herself in the mirror, taking photos."

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How Ashla Rani got her name back

Pallium India trustee Ashla Rani's life changed forever after a train accident. Four years in and out of hospitals and multiple surgeries had reduced her identity to her medical condition. "I was just 'that case of spinal cord injury'. That was my identity." Everything shifted when she became a recipient of palliative care. "Suddenly people were calling me Ashla," she recalls.

For the first time, Ashla, now 43, and her mother, Janaki Krishnan, who was her primary caregiver, felt seen as individuals. Her mother was no longer just a bystander but acknowledged for her role as a caregiver, and her challenges in caring for someone 24x7.

Ashla has been the recipient of palliative care from people across generations, including young people. From a volunteer scouting for wheelchair accessible movie halls across Thiruvananthapuram so that Ashla could watch a movie in the theatre after a decade, to her daily activities such as bathing, she has received physical and emotional support.

She believes the youth bring in a different kind of energy when they volunteer for palliative care. It's about entrusting them with the opportunity and responsibility, she says. For both the recipient and caregiver, it is an important exchange. "It changes their attitude towards life as a whole," says Ashla.

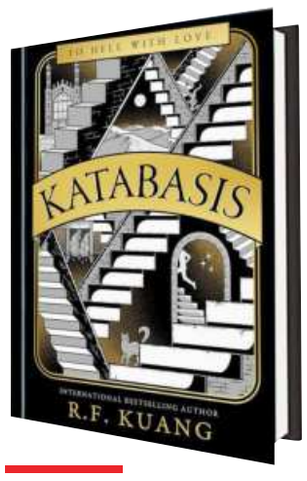
How to train the young

- Pallium India partners with 14 *panchayat*-level organisations in Thiruvananthapuram to run sessions for Classes IX and XI.
- At IPM, volunteers are undergraduates between the ages of 17 and 21. Direct care volunteers complete a 20-hour WHO-aligned caregiver programme, with a six-month psychosocial support option for weekly visits.
- Pain and Palliative Care Society, Thrissur, also offers sensitisation programmes to student volunteers.
- Farook College in Kozhikode runs a pain and palliative care clinic and a dialysis centre that is managed and aided by teachers and students.

IN CONVERSATION

HELL IS A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

R.F. Kuang on her new novel *Katabasis*, a scathing critique of academia, and why she has Lord Yama in it



Radhika Santhanam
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In her 2023 novel *Yellowface*, a hugely entertaining, satirical novel about the publishing industry, R.F. Kuang writes about two young novelists. In her latest, *Katabasis* (HarperCollins), she writes scathingly about the world of academia. Two rival postgraduates at Cambridge – Alice Law and Peter Murdoch – go to hell (literally) to look for their professor, Jacob Grimes, and haul him back in the hope that this will secure their future in their field, 'analytic magick'. Alice and Peter struggle to survive in hell, much like they did on campus, where fierce competition, power structures, abuse, and internalised misogyny took a toll on their mental and physical health. Kuang integrates philosophy, religious beliefs, and mathematical concepts in this ambitious work. In a Zoom interview, the 29-year-old novelist, who loves exploring new genres, speaks about world-building, Lord Yama, and the opportunities that *Yellowface* opened up. Edited excerpts:

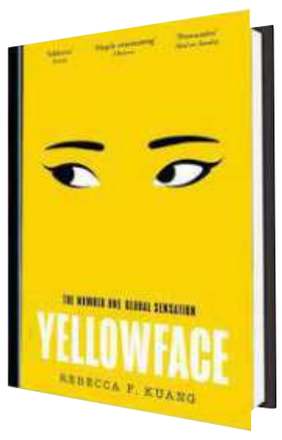
Question: *The book is called* Katabasis *and is about the descent to hell. Is the idea from Xenophon's* Anabasis*, which is about ascent?*
Answer: 'Katabasis' is a Greek word that means the hero's journey to the underworld. It can be a literal journey to hell – and in the case of my novel, it is – but it can also metaphorically refer to the story structure in which the protagonists reach the lowest of their lows, the place where it seems like there is no hope, where they are disgusted, or they have given up on themselves. So, I'm thinking about the concept of katabasis literally and metaphorically.

Q: *Hell is not fire or demons, "hell is a campus", as Peter says. Why did you decide to set a story about academia in hell?*
A: Personally, I don't believe in the idea of an eternal hell. I don't know what happens when we die, but I don't think it makes sense to punish souls eternally. There is no sin that you can possibly commit that deserves eternal punishment. There should always be the possibility of redemption.

But hell is structured as a campus in the novel because I have a theory. Suppose there is a version of hell in which you are punished for the sins or the flaws that you had when you were alive, then it might make sense for hell to look like a mirror version of the moral universe that you were most familiar with. You would understand the stakes and the environment, and things would be painful to you because of the memories associated with them. Because Peter and Alice have spent most of their lives in academia, hell looks like a campus to them.

Q: *There are plenty of references to philosophy, religion, and mathematics. You talk a lot about Foucault and Dante; you dig into beliefs in Buddhism, Christianity, and other religions. How did you go about researching these vastly different fields?*
A: I'm a really curious person, so I am always reading very broadly while I'm writing. I took a lot of inspiration from T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It is an epic modernist poem that's also extremely referential and intertextual and is drawing on many mythologies and epic works of the past. In the same way, I am writing the detritus of all the culture that's come before me and just trying to give a snapshot of how I'm reading all of these works. Any time I talk to somebody studying a field different from my own, I'm burning with questions to ask them. I take any tidbits they give me, like little nuggets of gold, and like a magpie, I just fill my nest with fun ideas.

Q: *A lot of it is fantasy as well. How hard is it to write literary nonsense and is that something you've always wanted to try doing?*



A: I think it's very natural in part because I'm just a sort of silly person. I think many people who are intensely curious are silly people. So you don't just learn an idea and treat it as a sacred thing; you play around with it, you insert it into an inappropriate context, you push the logic of the idea to its breaking point and ask if it might still hold in various contexts.

Q: *Lord Yama is a character in the book. Did you borrow from Hindu mythology?*
A: One of my closest friends who is Hindu read an early version of the book and said, why did you put Lord Yama in this? And this was so curious to me because I didn't approach him through Hindu mythology; I approached the figure of Yama through Chinese Buddhist mythology. He's a figure who has many shapes in different cultures, so we had fun comparing the Yamas we knew.

Q: *Are the characters of Alice, Peter, and Grimes influenced by people you know?*
A: Alice and Peter are directly inspired by *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*. I've always loved the names Alice and Peter. Alice is getting lost in a world of ideas and Peter is in many ways a boy who never grew up. Professor Grimes is an archetype of the male genius that everybody makes excuses for, who can just behave boorishly. Unfortunately, there are too many possible examples to name of people who have abused their positions, taken advantage of the students who trusted them, and had intimate relationships with them.

Q: *Since you write so sharply about these worlds that you know so well – publishing in* Yellowface *or academia in* Katabasis *– have you ever worried about offending people in these fields? And have people been offended?*
A: I'm sure they have, but that doesn't really matter to me. I think that most good people in academia and publishing are just like me. We love the ideal. If you love something, then you want to fix it, you want to be honest about its flaws. I think that's why people complain about university all the time. It's not like we are just blindly stuck in our jobs. We are constantly asking ourselves, how are we failing our students and what would have to change in order for us to be better educators.

Q: Yellowface *was a phenomenon. When a book does that well, is there a lot of pressure when you're writing your next book?*
A: I don't feel the pressure as much because I change genres easily. I always like to work on something totally new. I think there would have been pressure if I was trying to write the next *Yellowface*. I would have been trying to replicate all the things that worked. But actually, the success of *Yellowface* was very freeing because it gave me many privileges. It has put me in a place of relative security, not just financially, but also creatively, because now I have the trust and faith of my publishers, and I feel like I can sort of do whatever I want.

Q: *You studied in the same institutions that your characters are from – Oxford and Cambridge. Is there something you would say to students like Alice who are struggling with their mental health?*
A: Don't forget to look up and behold the stars.

Scan the QR code to watch Kuang in conversation on magazine.thehindu.com

R.F. Kuang integrates philosophy, religion and mathematical concepts in her new novel. (GETTY IMAGES)

Rickshaw pullers rest in between rides in Kolkata. (GETTY IMAGES)

Chronicles of life à la Byapari

Shorn of sentimentality, the Dalit writer's works offer a glimpse into Bengal beyond the *bhadralok*

Sudipta Datta
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Writer and politician Manoranjan Byapari's work, which looks at life in Bengal beyond the *bhadralok*, has opened a new framework of conversation. What is it like to live on the margins of society and challenge dominant narratives of politics, culture, caste?

It's now a well-known fact that the Dalit author had a serendipitous meeting with writer and activist Mahasweta Devi while driving her in his rickshaw which set him on his literary journey. Urged by Mahasweta, who tirelessly chronicled the lives of the marginalised and dispossessed, Byapari began writing about his life sans privilege.

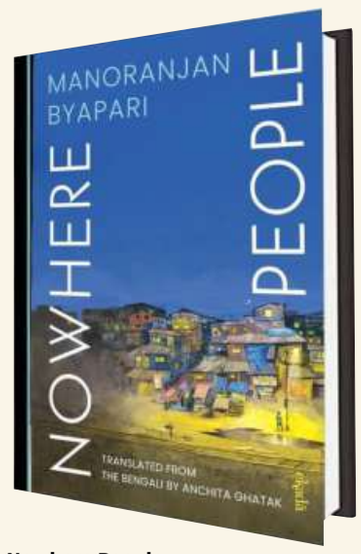
His memoir, *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (*Interrogating My Chandal Life*), shines a light on the marginalisation of lower castes and life as a refugee. His two dozen and more works of fiction and non-fiction foreground the poor and the downtrodden of Kolkata and its suburbs. The latest to be translated into English is *Chhonnochhaara*, first published in Bengali in 2018. Translated into English by Anchita Ghatak, *Nowhere People* tells the story of "destitute, vagrant and rootless" people who make railway station platforms and the settlements alongside its tracks their home.

Never a good night's sleep

It begins with the arrival of a stranger seeking shelter one winter night – no one has figured out where he has come from or where he is headed, and hence there is a "niggling anxiety all around".

He will soon be christened 'Nobo' or new by a motley group of rickshaw pullers as he says he doesn't have anybody or a name. He often wonders how people who are struggling to make ends meet go beyond themselves to help those like him. Nobo and his rickshaw puller friends are from different religious communities and places but they look out for each other. In that squalor, they hold on to ideals of compassion and justice.

The platforms and the areas around the railway station are home to drifters – rickshaw pullers, rag pickers, fish and vegetable sellers, tea-stall and hooch-shop owners. All of them, writes Byapari, lead tedious, monotonous lives. "Winter, rains or summer – no season brought any change." Girls go missing, people drop dead and poverty is commonplace.



Nowhere People
Manoranjan Byapari,
trs Anchita Ghatak
Ekada
₹599

Without sentimentality, Byapari drives home the point: "People who go to bed hungry are unlikely to get a good night's sleep. They are assailed with worries as soon as they shut their eyes."

Gritty reality

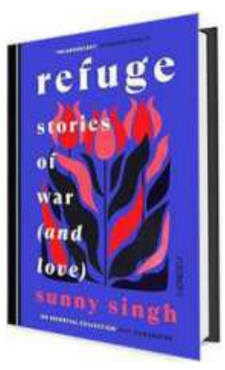
In the forest of the night, other characters make an appearance; people like Joga and Madhu who have forgotten their real names, fiesty women like Oloka, or Horen Ghosh who had been robbed of everything by Partition except his language, which "clung to him with deep love". And then a baby – always a symbol of hope – is found next to the platform urinal, with a bottle of milk near him.

The translation sticks as close as possible to the original, and through it, readers get a glimpse of a Bengal not always on literary pages – rituals, customs, dialects included. Byapari intersperses broader social, cultural and economic commentary in gritty stories about individuals.

When Maloti gets married to Shundor (Ali), she does not give up all the Hindu customs. "Many women from such families wore *sindoor*, planted *tulsi* in their yards and worshipped Monosha [the snake goddess]. In the rail *basti*, no one frowned upon the *sindoor* on Maloti's forehead." With his realistic fiction, Byapari has chronicled lives that would have never been written about, and also opened doors for other writers.

BROWSER

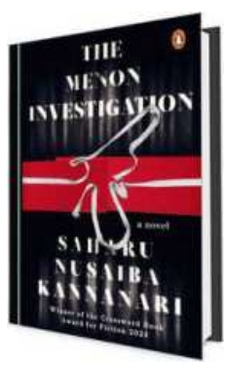
Refuge: Stories of War (And Love)
Sunny Singh
HarperCollins
₹499
The London-based academic and writer, known for her advocacy of decolonisation and inclusion in literature, turns her gaze to the human cost of war, exploring both trauma and tenderness, in this anthology that spans continents and decades.



People Like Us
Jason Mott
Trapeze
₹1,364 (ebook)
Winner of the 2021 National Book Award, Mott returns with a novel rooted in reality yet alive with dream-like flourishes — from sea monsters to time travel. The novel follows two Black writers searching for belonging in a world scarred by gun violence.

The Pretenders
Avtar Singh
Simon & Schuster
₹599
The author and magazine editor brings two decades of literary experience to this ambitious novel set during the Delta wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The story, both sombre and hopeful, moves from Delhi's gated colonies to the streets of Bangkok to locked-down Beijing.

The Menon Investigation
Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari
Penguin
₹599
The novel gives the police procedural a uniquely Indian twist with its cast of imperfect victims and unlikely perpetrators. Last year, the Kerala author made a mark with his award-winning debut novel, *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half*.



Life of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay on NIF Prize longlist

Ten books which 'deepen our understanding of India's recent past and present'

In her review of Nico Slate's biography of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Urvashi Butalia says the writer's attempt to define what "freedom" meant to the fierce nationalist and socialist is commendable.

For Chattopadhyay, it was "not just the freeing of India from the shackles of the British, but the freeing of India from itself, from the many hierarchies it carried within, from the inequalities that were rife, from the patriarchies that were deep," writes Butalia. Hierarchies, inequalities, patriarchies still run deep in India of the 21st century.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay – The Art of Freedom (HarperCollins) is one of the 10 books on the longlist of one of the country's foremost non-fiction prizes which bears her name.

The other books on the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay NIF Book Prize longlist for 2025 also "deepen our understanding of India's recent past and present" as member of the jury Niraja Gopal Jayal put it.

Here's the list: *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva* (Princeton University Press) by Janaki Bakhle; *Iru: The Remarkable Life of Irawati Karve* (Speaking Tiger Books) by Urmilla Deshpande, Thiago Pinto Barbosa; *India's Near East: A New History* (Penguin) by Avinash Paliwal; *Gods, Guns, and Missionaries: The Making Of The Modern Hindu Identity* (Penguin) by Manu S. Pillai; *Iconoclast: A Reflective Biography of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (Penguin) by Anand Teltumbde; *The Gujaratis: A Portrait of a Community* (Aleph) by Salil Tripathi; *India's Forgotten Country: A View From the Margins* (Penguin) by Bela Bhatia; *Engineering a Nation: The Life and Career of M. Visvesvaraya* (Penguin) by Aparajith Ramnath; and *The Backstage of Democracy: India's Election Campaigns and the People Who Manage Them* (Cambridge University Press) by Amogh Dhar Sharma.

The shortlist will be announced in October and the winner on December 6.

The winner will be announced on December 6.

INTERVIEW

'ONLY THE RICH CAN BE AUSTERE'

Manu Joseph on why there is peace between the classes despite glaring inequality

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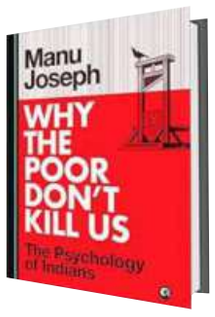
In his first foray into non-fiction, columnist, novelist and screenwriter Manu Joseph seeks to solve a singular mystery: why is there peace between the classes in one of the most unequal regions on earth? In *Why The Poor Don't Kill Us: The Psychology of Indians* (Aleph), Joseph explores, in trademark acerbic prose crackling with provocative bon mots and epigrammatic observations, many of the behaviour patterns that might plausibly be deemed as 'typically Indian'. He speaks about, among other things, the psychological dimension of poverty, the austerity of the rich, and the pointlessness of owning a small dog. Edited excerpts:

Question: *Do the poor in India feel their poverty differently from the poor in a European country?*
Answer: The fact that our cities are so messy and look much poorer than they need to be probably reassures them that India has not left them behind. The messiness has an advantage. The way a European city looks, its affluence – I feel it will be horrible to be poor there. It would be like a bitter Twitter [now known as X] page trapped in Instagram, which is what the book also argues.

Being poor in a poor country – it's terrible because you don't have the basics – but you still feel you belong in a way you probably don't belong in a very rich, beautiful European city. Being poor in a poor country has a calming effect. In some respects – not all – it even saves us from some violence that would be completely reasonable given the fact that a lot of Indians cannot afford the simple things in life. This is one of the underrated reasons for the disenchantment in the western world. When you have nothing to eat, your standards for yourself become so low you are not even comparing yourself with others – you don't think anything is your right. But the moment you are fed, and you can afford two pairs of jeans, you



are still poor by the standards of your society but you begin to feel that you should have been dealt better cards.

Q: *With reference to the title, what are some of the unspoken things about poverty in India?*
A: The book does not use the term 'kill' literally. We are not only talking about violence – there are many ways in which they can revolt. Let's not forget that elections are not a moral act as people think. Elections are a form of revolt which happens every five years. No doubt, the poor in the West are better fed than the poor in India. In fact, the new aspect of poverty is fatness, even in India. They are all eating their Maggi noodles, and one of the unspoken things about poverty in India is diabetes at that level.

Even in India the definition of poverty as hunger is going away – this form of poverty is the easiest to solve. You just need to eat and you have solved the issue of hunger. But there are a whole lot of things which happen to a person who is feeling deprived. A lot depends on the mindset. Even among domestic helps, for instance, I've noticed that some of them want to own the latest phones because that is their personality, and it is these people who feel most horrible about their poverty. They believe they deserve to live better but don't have the means to afford that, and those would be the people who are most disenchanted and would like to revolt. That also happens when you have tasted a bit of the good life. That is what happens in the West – they know their rights, they are empowered in many ways, but at the same time they feel poor because the society around them is very rich.

Q: *Your book is subtitled 'The Psychology of Indians'. But India is so diverse. Is a homogenising category like 'Indians' useful for making generalisations on how they behave?*
A: At one level, people are different, societies are different. But these differences are a bit overrated. There is a human thread between everybody, and so generalisation is possible. Some behaviours are unique to communities, like South Indians, and I have also dealt with those things in the book. For instance, the rich in South India, especially Kerala, they are austere in a way the Punjabi is not. Even the Marwaris, you wouldn't know how rich a Marwari is until his daughter is getting married. In Kerala, you wouldn't know that even if his daughter is getting married. I am arguing that maybe these were ancient techniques of keeping yourself safe in a world where there are a lot of poor people. And by the way, you cannot be austere unless you have money.

Q: *Your book is rather nasty towards Pomeranians. Why?*
A: It was the posh dog when I was a teenager. I've got into a lot of trouble because of my views on Pomeranians. I would say something about Pomeranians, and I would end up at some guy's house and he would have a Pomeranian. Now the Pomeranian era is over but some people still appear to have it. I really don't see the point of small dogs – why don't you just get a rat?

Scan the QR code to watch Manu Joseph in conversation on magazine.thehindu.com

Manu Joseph is author of *The Illicit Happiness of Other People* and creator of Netflix series *Decoupled*. (AKHILA EASWARAN)

Living in a watershed

In his new book, the environmentalist roots for rivers in crisis, including the Adyar in Chennai

Neha Sinha

In his latest book, *Wild Fictions*, Amitav Ghosh writes about the role of a novelist as opposed to that of a historian. "The historian's past has a sweep that the novelist's doesn't. The difference is between observing the flow of a river from the shore and from within the waters: the direction of the current is the same in both cases, but a swimmer, or a fish, has at every moment a million different choices and options."

The point that Ghosh, reflecting on his own work as a novelist is making, is that of immersion. Novelists have to respond to what characters feel, touch and fall into, unlike historians who may discuss wider trends.

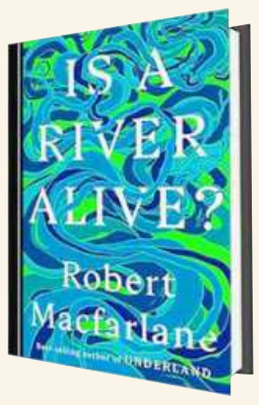
Natural spirits
Robert Macfarlane's *Is a River Alive?* is not a novel, yet he dips into the waters, novelist-style, of the characters that pepper the pages, mycologists, musicians, activists, grieving friends, hermits, and rivers. The book takes us in close proximity to three rivers, and the perils they face – the mist-shrouded Rio Los Cedros in Ecuador, the deadened Adyar in Chennai, and the turbulent Mutehekau Shipu in Canada. What Macfarlane attempts is more than a simple personification of rivers. By visiting each river, navigating them, and staying by them, he attempts a character sketch which is at once bewildering and animated. To save a river, one might expect a tabling of their ecosystem services, their PH values, their gallons of water, irrevocable proof.

Yet the book offers something different: it suggests that rivers are too much of the "other" to be neatly tabulated. Macfarlane makes the political choice of rebelling against human-made boxes, painting a complex picture that is beyond simple objectivity. It suggests older ways of knowing rivers. Ecologists might call this "ecological character," a word that exists in India's Wetland rules (2017). The author suggests an animacy of the river beyond human-centring: this isn't anthropocentric, it is enlarging the meaning of life, he argues. In 2017, the High Court of Uttarakhand delivered a landmark judgment, emphasising the "physical and spiritual sustenance" of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, making them legal persons. This was later stayed by the Supreme Court.

Life at Ennore creek
The book takes us close to the people who think in this manner and defend rivers. The mist-laden Los Cedros is threatened by gold mining, yet this is a reserve that was protected by law in a landmark judgment that upheld the Rights of Nature and protected the reserve from mining. We meet Giulina Furci, who finds fungi new to science in the shadow of the river. The Adyar river and Ennore creek are polluted beyond belief, yet the author finds life struggling through while walking with environmentalist Yuvan Aves. The eddying Mutehekau Shipu is threatened by a dam, yet we see why the river means so much (a legal person with a right to live as per Innu declarations) even as the human party gets bitten by blackflies.

This book is entirely show, not tell. There are no sermons on why you must protect nature, only monographs on what, or *who*, the rivers mean. In the tradition of Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the book offers a view of the world where the person and the river, or the person and nature, are seen in relation to each other. "To be is to be related," as Aves says in the book.

New ways of seeing
The author offers a vocabulary for this new way of seeing the world, a world-building, so to speak, in which rivers write time and features: he cites the Maori phrase – "Who are your waters" (mine, for example, would be the Yamuna). He writes on the Los Cedros: "River and cloud can't be separated – each authors the other." When a river spiral throws him upstream, he suggests he is going back in time. In a dream, he sees "grief-cutter ants", a play on leaf-cutter ants. Macfarlane thus moors his identity around rivers, the riverbed and the catchment – "everyone lives in a watershed". Each character we meet is carrying grief: the death of a parent, the death of a sister, the death of a friend, the death of landscapes. It is the river that heals them, gives them purpose, buoys sinking spirits.



Is a River Alive? Robert Macfarlane Hamish Hamilton/ Penguin Random House ₹1,699

Returning to *Wild Fictions*, one more parallel rings true. Ghosh writes: "High modernity taught us that the earth was inert and existed to be exploited by human beings for their own purposes... We are slowly beginning to understand that in order to hear the earth, we must first learn to love it."

Love, grief, and hope flow through this book. Let the author lead you downstream, let the river toss you and nourish you, and then you can answer the title's question for yourself.

The reviewer is a conservation biologist and author of Wild and Wilful - Tales of 15 Iconic Indian species.

THE EMPATHY EFFECT

HOW KERALA'S YOUNG ARE STEPPING UP

ILLUSTRATION: SAAI

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

The experience is still cherished by those who knew her, for by the time the 2024 event came along, the girl was in a severely weak state. She passed away soon after. "It was very emotional for me though we're trained to handle such moments," recalls Kathoon. "The comfort was in knowing that we had made her happy in her last months."

Antidote to loneliness

If emotions are tough to handle for some young volunteers, compassion too doesn't come easy. At 14, Fathima froze at the sight of a catheter during an initial palliative care visit. And in her confusion, she gulped down the coconut water meant for the patient. "I felt terribly guilty. I was supposed to make the situation better, but made him feel worse with my reaction." She eased back into caregiving through the healing power of words. "I started writing letters to patients. That helped me feel I still had something meaningful to offer,"

Training and counselling help build empathy and teach small but vital details. "We were told not to drink juice in front of diabetic patients even if their family insisted, because they may not have had juice in years," Fathima says. She also learnt to notice little details such as if families could afford medicine or had anybody to help around.

Beyond school, palliative care volunteering is often through word of mouth and cuts across the socio-economic divide. Students offer help as and when required; patient needs are assessed by the organisation they are volunteering with, the local nurse or village *panchayat*. It could vary from once a week to a few times a month. Usually, one patient is visited by two volunteers.

The students' youthful energy can be an antidote to the loneliness of elderly patients. Kerala's long migration history means much of its working population is employed outside India, resulting in a large number of elders living alone. "In 2015, over 1.7 lakh senior citizens in Kerala lived in single-member households. Many live in complete isolation," says Dr. Rajagopal.

Given this background, requests for care can come in many forms. Once an elderly man asked Fathima to photograph him with his wife so they could have a laminated portrait. "Sadly, he passed away before I could give it to him," she says.

The emotional weight of the work is real, but so is its impact on both patients and volunteers. Kathoon remembers cutting the thickened toenails of a paraplegic woman she was visiting. "It wasn't a big thing for me, just a human act. But to her, it was huge. It meant comfort and dignity." One day, when Kathoon was running late for her visit, she received a worried phone call. "'Aren't you coming today,' the woman asked me. That's when we realised how much our visits meant to her," she says.

Kathoon had cared for her grandmother earlier but volunteering taught her the importance of dignity. "These patients once lived active lives too," she says. Palliative care, she believes, is about making sure someone feels seen and valued.

Ayana Kunju, 21, works with IPM, joining doctors and nurses on their rounds, assisting with medicines, and providing psychosocial support. She first joined as a volunteer while in college. Caring for patients seems to be her calling and it has helped define her chosen career of a social worker. "When I dress wounds or do small procedures, I feel very happy because I am helping so many people. The happiness on their faces means a lot," she says.

In the nuclear family era, such experiences can bridge generational gaps. "Today, many children lack emotional anchors," observes Dr. Rajagopal. "Compassion and connection with elders help develop emotional intelligence." He believes young people often have more sincerity on the job than adults whose commitments are divided due to varied responsibilities.

Building connections

However, not everyone can deal with an atmosphere of ailment and death. Kunju and Kathoon both say losing someone can be deeply emotional. Their training often focuses on this aspect and there is constant support. "It helps to hear about the experiences of our seniors and others around," says Kunju.

There is also the risk of "hyper-volunteering". Dr. Mohan recalls a time when a volunteer wrongly advised a cancer patient to skip treatment. "These misjudgements happen because volunteers aren't trained to diagnose or treat, yet some begin to think of themselves as experts." He believes the answer lies in structured training and setting clear boundaries.

Despite the flaws and shortcomings, young people coming together to bring compassionate care to the ailing and dying is a unique phenomenon. As Mohammed notes: "It cultivates compassion – something that cannot be learnt from textbooks, but only through real, human connection." It's something the early architects of palliative care in Kerala recognised and drove home. "Doctors and nurses will always have an important role, but the driving force has to come from the people," adds Mohammed.

In today's conflict-ridden world and times of social apathy, being kind and considerate can sometimes be considered as weaknesses. From that viewpoint, young people lending their time to caring for the ailing, abandoned and dying can be seen as a gentle yet constant pushback against a society that often deserts the weak and vulnerable. "Volunteering in palliative care has taught me to trust in the politics of love and care. It gives me hope," says Fathima.

The writer is a freelance journalist and the co-author of Rethink Ageing.

Spinal warriors in Puducherry

In Puducherry, Sanjeevan Palliative Care of Sri Aurobindo Society supports over 2,250 patients across 145 villages, and gives students the opportunity to find empathy and responsibility within themselves by visiting them. Dr. Mohan Raja S., medical officer at Sanjeevan, says, "Schoolchildren from Classes II to X often visit patients across villages to offer psycho-social support. They help them comb their hair or spend time with them." Nursing students too volunteer. Given the many cases of spinal injury in the region due to road accidents, a WhatsApp-based support group called Spinal Warriors brings together student volunteers and spinal injury survivors to provide help when needed.

THE JUDGMENT-FREE DIVORCE CAMP

At Break Free Stories, a collective in Kerala, women are encouraged to process their pain and work towards emotional recovery

Navamy Sudhish
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When Surya's life took a dark turn after an early marriage at 21, she went into depression. Pushed to the limits after eight years of abuse and gaslighting, she attempted to end her life but was thankfully saved by her father. Eventually, she broke free from the toxic relationship, resumed her studies, and found a job as a pharmacist in the UAE.

Though an independent professional now, Surya says she is still working towards emotional recovery. Healing is not a straight road for most divorcees and it is only recently that the 36-year-old found the ideal space to process her grief – at Break Free Stories, a divorcee collective started by Malappuram resident Rafia Afi. "Sharing my story with people who truly understood my pain, and who listened without judgment, was an entirely new experience for me. It felt much more impactful than years of therapy," says Surya.

In May this year, about 20 women converged on the hill town of Vagamon in Kerala's Idukki district for the first offline camp organised by Break Free Stories. Until then, the group had been active largely on WhatsApp and Instagram. For some women, the camp was their first time travelling alone.

The group comprised divorcees, widows, and separated women. They stayed in tents, went trekking, played games and participated in icebreaker sessions, where they shared deeply personal experiences.

"I try to keep the number of attendees under 20 because people open up more easily in smaller groups. We also have a legal advisor to help participants, especially in cases where women are engaged in long-drawn legal battles," says Rafia. "However, I also know many women face restrictions that prevent them from attending these camps in person. For them, I'm working on conducting online sessions," she adds.

In need of a support system

The subsequent camps took place in Alappuzha and Kozhikode, followed by an international session in Dubai. "I had to make a personal visit to Dubai, and during that time, the tragic death of Vipanchika Maniyan (the 32-year-old Kerala woman who was found dead with her 18-month-old daughter in Sharjah reportedly over dowry harassment) had garnered significant media attention," says Rafia.

She points out that many women choose to move out of India after divorce to survive the trauma and stigma. "I was getting a lot of enquires from Dubai and the meetup was planned as a one-night, two-day staycation. However, no one slept that night as the women cried, hugged each other and confirmed that their trauma was real and not their fault. They've since formed a highly active support group," she says.

Rafia explains that her own experience navigating the emotional turmoil of divorce spurred her to create Break Free Stories. "I'm a divorcee myself, and even with a strong support system of family and friends, the process was incredibly difficult for me," she says. "Later, when I started creating online content, many people began reaching out to me. I quickly realised that countless women were struggling with the stress and grief of divorce with absolutely no support. That's what prompted me to organise the first camp."

Rafia Ali, founder of Break Free Stories; and (far left) the divorce camp at Vagamon in May. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Finding common ground

Many women arrive at the meetings with a lot of apprehensions, but they quickly discover a comfortable and supportive environment. As one participant shares, "It's a place where you can unburden easily. We were surrounded by women who offered immediate, unspoken understanding. Interacting with them generated a sense of belonging, and I felt empowered. Also, it's a beautiful experience to see women coming out of their cocoons and embracing their true selves for the first time."

Break Free Stories has now blossomed into a community connecting over a hundred women, with its Instagram page followed by thousands. While notifications about upcoming camps and videos garner many views, the platform also sees negative comments, including those about the "futility" of the camps and suggesting that the women should instead focus on finding new partners. "The comments section of my Instagram page is really bad, but that's okay," says Rafia, undeterred. "Marriage is beautiful when you find the right person, but the end of a relationship is not the end of life, and that's the message I want to spread."

(Assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts is available on Tele-MANAS 14416.)

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

ONCE THE DOMAIN OF THE DREADED SANSARCHAND WHO POACHED OUT EVERY TIGER FROM THIS PARK, SARISKA IS NOW HOME TO A SMALL BUT STABLE TIGER POPULATION, AFTER A SUCCESSFUL REINTRODUCTION EFFORT.
AND NOW, THE RAJASTHAN GOVERNMENT IS PLANNING ANOTHER HISTORIC REINTRODUCTION HERE!
MARBLE MINING TO RESUME IN SARISKA AFTER CHANGES TO RESERVE BOUNDARY
I HAVE A RECURRING NIGHTMARE THAT SANSARCHAND TOO HAS REINTRODUCED HIMSELF BACK FROM THE DEAD, AND HAS JOINED THE RAJASTHAN CABINET.
TOON

CAUGHT BETWEEN WAR AND WORSHIP

Preah Vihear, though in the middle of conflict, is a symbol of the shared legacy between Southeast Asia and Tamil Nadu

Sherin Someetharan

Rajendra Chola I could scarcely have imagined that the millennial year of his Southeast Asian campaigns would be celebrated with such grandeur at his capital, Gangaikonda Cholapuram (it even saw Prime Minister Modi participating in the festivities). Nor could his contemporary and ally, Khmer King Suryavarman I, have foreseen that the monumental temple he commissioned at Preah Vihear in Cambodia would someday become a symbol of contested heritage.

The 11th century temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, has been the centre of conflict for over a century, with Thailand and Cambodia fighting over its ownership. In the past, the International Court of Justice has ruled in favour of Cambodia. The temple has drawn international attention in recent days following attacks on its complex. While a ceasefire has been reached after days of intense clashes, irreparable loss to cultural heritage remains a serious concern.

A masterpiece of Khmer architecture and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is perched atop a cliff in the forested Dângrêk mountain range, which forms a natural border between Cambodia and Thailand. The temple is built across multiple levels, and features five *gopurams* (entrance towers) that rise from the lowest elevation to the highest, connected by causeways and stairways. The sanctum sanctorum is located at an elevation of 525 metres. Each level unfolds in a seamless architectural sequence, with the *gopurams* adorned with ornate pediments and lintels.

The Tamil connection

The temple's deep historical and cultural ties to the Tamil region are not well-known. It was built over a period of 300 years, with several kings contributing to its construction, but the present structure is largely attributed to Suryavarman I. It was completed under the reign of Suryavarman II, who built Angkor Wat.

Inscriptions dating to around 1020 CE reveal that Suryavarman I gifted Rajendra Chola I a chariot, seeking his support and protection against threats from the Tambralinga kingdom and the Srivijaya king Sangrama Vijayatunggavarman. In 1025 CE, Rajendra Chola I launched his famed naval expedition against the Srivijaya kingdom, which included Kedah (Kadaram) earning him the title 'Kadaram Kondan' (conqueror of Kadaram).

Even iconographically, the temple features elements that reflect a Tamil connection. The image of the dancing Shiva, Nataraja, central to Tamil Saiva traditions, is a common motif in Chola art. In temple reliefs,

Preah Vihear is perched atop a cliff in the forested Dângrêk mountain range; (below) a carving of Nataraja; and intricately crafted façades. (SHERIN SOMEETHARAN)

The Khmer kings were known for their religious syncretism. Their temples often integrate elements of Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and even Buddhism. Preah Vihear, though dedicated to Shiva, has themes of Vaishnavism on its lintels and pediments

Nataraja is depicted alongside musicians, with the skeletal figure of Karaikkal Ammaiyar at his feet.

Ammaiyar lived in the 6th century and is considered to be the earliest of the Nayanmars (poet-saints) devoted to Shiva. Her hymns on Shiva preceded those of others such as Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar. In her hymns, she expressed her desire to be at the feet of the dancing Shiva, which is iconographically depicted in many Chola temples, including the Peruvudaiyar temples of Rajaraja I at Thanjavur and Rajendra I at Gangaikonda Cholapuram.

At Preah Vihear, this motif is engraved on the pediment above the northern entrance to the sanctum sanctorum. To his left is a musician with a percussion instrument and, to the right, at his feet, lies what appears to be a weathered figure of Ammaiyar.

The positioning mirrors Chola temples' iconography. Being placed at the entrance of the sanctum sanctorum highlights the reverence accorded to Ammaiyar.

This isn't an isolated instance. Temples restored or expanded by Suryavarman I – Banteay Srei, Phnom Chisor, Vat Ek, and Vat Baset – feature this motif. An inscription at Preah Vihear also notes that a golden Nataraja was gifted to the temple by Divakarapandita, the spiritual guru of Suryavarman II.

Vaishnava motifs and Pallava influence

The Khmer kings were known for their religious syncretism. Their temples often integrate elements of Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and even Buddhism. Preah Vihear, though dedicated to Shiva, has themes of Vaishnavism on its lintels and pediments. For instance, the Paarkadal scene (churning of the ocean of milk) depicts the tug-of-war between the *devas* and *asuras* churning the *paarkdal* to extract *amritham* (nectar). Seen in Cambodian temples, including Angkor Wat, the motif is rarely seen in Indian temple art. The scene is, however, depicted in the Kailasanathar temple and Vaikunda Perumal temple in Kanchipuram, highlighting its significance as a cherished Pallava theme.

At Preah Vihear, this scene is intricately carved on the southern doorway pediment of Gopuram IV. The lintel below has Vishnu reclining on Ananta, the serpent, a feature seen in Cambodian temples since the 7th century. This motif of the reclining deity is a familiar one across Tamil temples – from those in Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram in the north to Srirangam in the centre, to the Padmanabhaswamy temple in the extreme south.

On the eastern doorway lintel of the same *gopuram* is Krishna dancing on the serpent Kaliya (Kalinga Narthana Krishna). The temple also features reliefs of Krishna lifting Mount Govardhana, Vishnu on Garuda, and the guardian lions – motifs reflecting influences from the Pallava iconographic traditions.

As we celebrate the 1,000th year of Rajendra Chola I and his legacy, these connections are in full motion. The parallel developments at the Preah Vihear temple during the same historical period make it all the more vital to recognise the deep historical ties between the Tamil region and Southeast Asia – two cultures that have, for centuries, shared heritage and produced some of the world's greatest architectural and artistic masterpieces.

The writer is an IRS officer based in Chennai.

GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

I am a proud Indian voter

I believe you will find a dozen different avatars of me that all look the same and live within 500 metres of each other

I am an Indian voter. My religion is Democracy. My religion has only one festival. It's called Elections. We celebrate it round the year. We celebrate it through a ritual known as voting. That's why in all official forms, under the column 'religious identity', I write 'voter'. What happens when you vote is that you daub the sacred ink on your finger and cast something called a ballot.

Our religion, like many others, has a god. The god is called Election Commission. Our god is a trinity that manifests in three avatars: a Chief God, Regular God-1 and Regular God-2. They all work together to take good care of me. They give meaning to my life.

A typical day for me begins with a cup of Maltese tea, which we imbibe in honour of one of our gods who recently retired and settled down in Malta. Then I check my phone for my latest identity and address. Let's say my phone pings with an order to become Aditya Srivastava from Mahadevapura. I will then take an auto and go cast my vote in Mahadevapura. It's like how Ola drivers or Swiggy delivery agents operate, except I don't do it for money but for the love of god. Unlike Ola-Swiggy chaps who typically work within city limits, I deliver votes across the country.

Having cast my ballot at Mahadevapura, if I next get a directive to become Mandaveli Mayilsamy and go vote in a municipal election in Mylapore, I do it. I will first remove the sacred ink from my finger, then book the next available flight to Chennai, and on the way, make sure to keep my new EPIC (a form of *prasad* we get directly from our god) ready.

I'm like a cockroach

Some people with low IQ ask stupid questions like: are you Aditya Srivastava or Mandaveli Mayilsamy? In some religions, gods have many avatars. In my religion, the followers have many avatars. Next week, for example, I will reincarnate as Rahul Gandhi and vote in a Rotary Club election in Rae Bareli.

One reason why I will never convert to another religion is that my god shares with me some of the godly superpowers he wields. For example, I can be in four places at once, and I have been. During a major nationwide festival last year, I was in six places at the same time.

I can also shape-shift, and shrink myself to the size of a cockroach so that 180 of us can stay at one address, in a single room, with zero discomfort. Sometimes you may get the impression I have nowhere to stay because my address is 'Zero'. Don't worry – that doesn't mean I am homeless. Sometimes my face may look different from the last time you saw me. Or you may find that I used to be a handsome muscular man like Salman Khan but have suddenly become a 124-year-old grandmother like that *Titanic* lady. Don't panic – it's just Maya (one of my more popular avatars). Just cover me in a blanket and keep me warm as I'm carried on a bullock cart to cast my ballot.

Liberating identity

There is also this weird expectation among the ignorant that when a person reincarnates, the new avatar would look different from the previous avatar. In my religion, that is not necessarily the case. It is common to find a dozen different avatars of any given voter that all look the same and live within 500 metres of each other. That is the beauty of Democracy and that is why we worship the Election Commission.

Another silly question that people keep asking me: how could I be both Kunal Kamra in Tamil Nadu and Katrina Kaif in Kurla? They want to know how I could get rid of all my facial hair, alter my skin colour and lose 40 kg, and then grow my beard back, change my skin colour again, and gain 40 kg within three hours. Hello? It's like they never studied social anthropology in LKG. Let me clear this one last time. For ordinary people, identity is a binary – like veg/non-veg or *bhakt*/anti-national. But for us voters, identity is a spectrum, and I can be whoever I want, whenever I want, wherever I want. Tell me: can you think of anything more liberating than that?

Anyway, today is my last day as Geetakumari Devi from Patna. I will expire tonight – you will get the reason for my death directly from my god – but I am excited about my new life as Shah Rukh Khan in Bandra West.

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

Anand Krishnan with some of the dogs at ROAR, Bengaluru.

PERSON OF INTEREST

ANAND KRISHNAN: JOY AND SECOND CHANCES

The canine welfare activist and trainer is all about giving dogs with severe disabilities an improved quality of life

Anand Krishnan, 40, never gave up his childhood dream of working with dogs. Not when he enrolled in engineering school, like his family of engineers wanted, nor when he dropped out in the third year and began selling school buses and other commercial passenger vehicles for one of India's leading automakers.

He had grown up around dogs in Chennai, sneaking his plate of *sambhar* rice or curd rice past his grandmother to share it with the streeties outside his home. It was only natural when, alongside his sales day job, he began volunteering and also training to be a dog groomer and, later, a trainer. He never could be a veterinarian like he had always wanted, but he gathered enough formal knowledge to quit sales and work at a veterinary hospital in Bengaluru.

Back then, most shelters would euthanise dogs with spinal cord injuries – caused largely by road accidents or human cruelty (someone hitting a dog's spine with a hard object). "None of them had the capacity to take in paralysed dogs," says Krishnan. "Those who didn't believe in euthanasia used to keep them, but they were not able to give them any quality of life, and the dogs would eventually die of secondary infections." But Krishnan knew that there had to be more to their life than suffering.

Saving Old Monk and Pepsi

In 2012, when he rescued one such dog whom he named Remy Martin (the other two rescues who lived with him then were called Johnnie Walker and Old Monk), he thought to himself: "Let's not give up. We can do something." That marked the start of his second life as someone who would one day run his own shelter for paralysed dogs in Denkanikottai, 60 km from Bengaluru.

He set up ROAR or Remi's Organisation for Animal Rehabilitation in 2018 after he qualified as a hydrotherapist in the U.K. The shelter, his house essentially, has 52 paralysed residents (most are paraplegic and some are paraparetic) who move with the help of wheels.

An additional 18 dogs are neighbourhood rescues, many of them accident victims with fractures, or three legs. Most of the paralysed dogs have been 'adopted' by people who pay a monthly fee to support them. Krishnan is hoping to move to a larger facility in a year.

He shares all this very matter-of-factly, using words like "practical" and "stable" to describe himself. The only time he uses the word "heartbreaking" is when he tells me about Pepsi, a tiny dachshund who had to be rescued from a breeder who wanted to continue using her for breeding despite the fact that she was paralysed.

Yet, Krishnan is the sort of guy who will get up and drive 10 hours from Bengaluru to Thrissur in Kerala to pick up Kuttan, a paralysed dog, just because somebody tagged him on Facebook. At a time when we are fighting to keep Indies on our streets, Krishnan's story goes beyond a love for canines. Even the most ardent dog lovers are wary about taking responsibility for seriously injured dogs.

Can we learn to co-exist?

Krishnan's story, that he narrates without any dramatic pauses or flourishes, demonstrates an extraordinary empathy for animals – and the determination to ensure that seriously injured dogs can be joyful again. Remy died in 2015, but Bouncer, a brown and white paralysed puppy, whom he adopted from a shelter in Mumbai around the same time, is nearly 11 years old. Bouncer was Krishnan's first proof that a paralysed dog can live a full life. "We have gone on road trips, and to the beach," he says. "He's travelled a lot."

At ROAR, disability is not a limitation. Forget suffering, the focus is on adventure as is demonstrated by the many 'gate opening' videos on the non-profit's Instagram page where dogs on wheels excitedly rush out of the shelter for their run/playtime. Last year, on August 15, he attached the tricolour to their wheelchairs and the video went viral, but this year, there was no celebration because of the Supreme Court's demand to remove stray dogs from the streets of Delhi and the NCR.

Krishnan feels we wouldn't be in this situation if civic bodies had properly implemented the 24-year-old Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme, sterilising and vaccinating strays to control their population in a humane manner.

He wishes neighbourhoods would learn to co-exist, with those who don't like dogs ignoring or avoiding them and with those who take care of community dogs being mindful of where they feed the animals. He wants parents to keep a closer eye on their children and wants dog lovers to think of shelters for dogs with behavioural issues.

"Dogs are quick to forget and quick to move on," Krishnan says about those animals who have experienced cruelty. "That's something I think we should all definitely learn from them."

Priya Ramani is a Bengaluru-based journalist and the co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram.

GOREN BRIDGE

Shoulda peeked

Both vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

Today's deal is from an important team match played in Pakistan some years ago between a team from India and a team from Jordan. The Indian North-South at the other table had a bidding accident and bid to six spades, going down two. If the Jordanian pair at this table were able to stop in four spades, and make it, they would gain an important swing against their heavily favored opponents.

North's intelligent bidding allowed South to properly evaluate his ace-king of clubs as not very good opposite North's shortness. They stopped in four spades, a good decision, and the defense started with two high diamonds and a diamond ruff with the five of spades. What would you lead from the East hand after ruffing the diamond? A heart seemed safe, but looking at that dummy it was clear that South would then have no entry to his hand to take the trump finesse. He would have no choice but to lead the ace of spades, and great would be the fall thereon. East cleverly led a club, instead of a heart, won by South with the ace. Perhaps South should have been wary of this free entry, but he made the percentage play of a spade to the queen. He went down one, so Jordan had a small gain instead of a big one. Nice try.

NORTH
♠ A Q J 6 4
♡ A K Q
◇ Q 10 8 4 2
♣ Void

WEST
♠ 10 7
♡ J 10 3
◇ A K 5
♣ Q J 10 8 2

EAST
♠ K 5
♡ 9 8 5 4
◇ 7 3
♣ 7 6 5 4 3

SOUTH
♠ 9 8 3 2
♡ 7 6 2
◇ J 9 6
♣ A K 9

The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♣	Dbl	Pass	1♠
Pass	4♣*	Pass	4♠
All pass			

*Spade raise, shortness in clubs

Opening lead: Ace of ◇

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has August 24 ever given us?

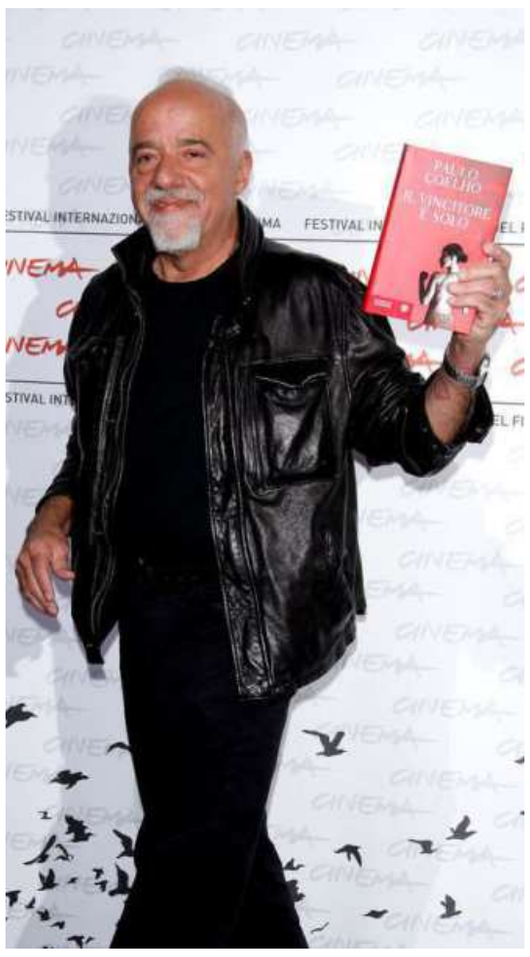
Berty Ashley

1 On August 24, 1853, chef George Crum – while working at Moon's Lake House near Saratoga Springs, New York – served a dish along with his special meats. Although the dish had existed before, he or his sister made it famous in New York, and soon it was known all over the world. Known as 'shavings', what are these, which are called 'crisps' in the U.K.?

2 On August 24, 1891, Thomas Edison filed a patent for his new device. He called it a 'kinetograph'. It was a large camera that captured a series of still images on a roll of film. Used in conjunction with his 'kinetoscope', this was the first type of what equipment?

3 Born this day in 1945, Vincent McMahon is an American businessman whose father was a promoter for a 'sport'. He was responsible for renaming his father's company to WWF, and it soon became the most popular of its kind. In 2002, a wildlife organisation disputed the name, and he renamed it to WWE. What does WWE stand for?

4 Born this day in 1947, Paulo Coelho is a songwriter who, after walking across Spain in 1986, had a spiritual awakening. He wrote a book that had only 900 prints. It eventually became a global bestseller. Following a shepherd boy who journeys to find treasure at the pyramids, it is named after an ancient name for a scientist. What is the title of this book?



Paulo Coelho. (GETTY IMAGES)

5 On this date in 1949, this intergovernmental treaty came into effect. It was a military alliance between 32 countries post-World War II and exists to provide collective security for the members. By what name is the treaty known, a reference to the water body they all surround?

6 Born on this date in 1988, Rupert Grint is an English actor whose earliest goal in life was to become an ice-cream man. At the age of 11, he got cast in a role that he portrayed in eight films. Which character did he play that he has become the embodiment of?

7 On this date in 1995, Microsoft released the first of its very popular operating systems. It introduced the concept of the 'Start Menu' and the 'Taskbar' to the world for the first time. By what name was this OS known?

8 On this date in 2006, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) released a new definition for a heavenly body. They introduced a new term, which reclassified what had since then been the furthest planet. What was the new classification and which heavenly body did it affect?

9 On this date in 2015, a Cambridge University physicist presented a new theory at a lecture in Stockholm. He stated that, unlike previously believed, the information lost inside a black hole could be stored in an alternate universe and could be a passage to another universe. Who was this physicist?

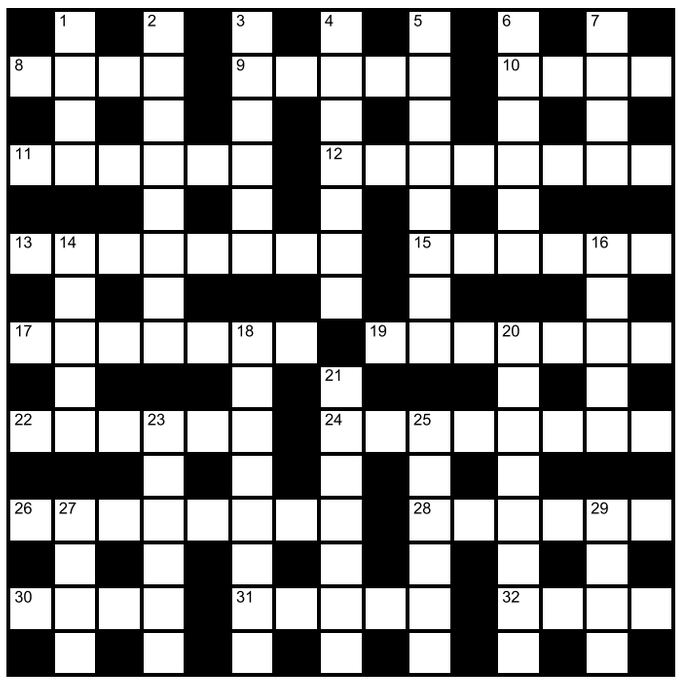
10 On August 24, 2017, the National Space Agency of this country successfully launched its very first satellite into space. The observation satellite was named Formosat-5, in reference to the older name of the country. Which country's space debut was this?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Potato chips
2. Motion picture camera
3. World Wrestling Entertainment
4. *The Alchemist*
5. NATO
6. Ron Weasley
7. Windows 95
8. Planets, Pluto
9. Stephen Hawking
10. Taiwan

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 18 (Set by Incognito)



Across

8 Setter and lieutenant convert solid into liquid by application of heat (4)
9 Counterfeit for giving exchange initially (5)
10 Sketch doctor with a woman (4)
11 Stick advertisement at this place (6)
12 US cat lay writhing in hospital department (8)
13 Extraordinary ace tests container (8)
15 Mad vet leaves Venetians in a tizzy (6)
17 One travelling around carrying counterfeit visa results in circumvention of law (7)
19 Roars, "Smithy uses it" (7)
22 Commencement of pain, laceration and fever leads to medieval epidemic (6)
24 Close shave next to girl! (4,4)
26 Peninsular Malaysia is behind reportedly high mountain range (8)
28 Embosses postal fee receipts (6)
30 Cobalt, aluminium and anthracite (4)
31 Hong Kong gangs' torture instruments (5)
32 "Arabian port" is bad English to some extent (4)

Down

1 Force boy at last (4)
2 Emphasises, "Small locks" (8)
3 A couple of females with middlemen in European court get result (6)
4 Pain in injured rat's windpipe (7)
5 Sweat on steeple (8)
6 Thought beginners in legal service can be role models (6)
7 Throw wildcats (4)
14 Smith's block included in Roman villas (5)
16 New stew cooked in salamanders (5)
18 Wrongly carve a bit of tendon in large hams (8)
20 A sad lamb dances and dances (8)
21 United Nations container near New York is mysterious (7)
23 Girl and woman hug student happily (6)
25 Help like sister when queen is away (6)
27 Historical curtain once protecting Soviet Union from unfair onslaughts (4)
29 Good King Edward's seaside construction (4)

SOLUTION NO. 17

C	O	A	R	S	E	S	T	■	C	A	P	S	I	D
E	■	F	■	T	■	P	■	A	■	U	■	N	■	R
D	E	F	L	A	T	E	■	L	I	N	D	A	N	E
A	■	A	■	U	■	A	■	L	■	T	■	C	■	S
R	U	I	A	N	■	K	E	E	P	S	A	K	E	S
S	■	R	■	C	■	I	■	Y	■	■	■	B	■	I
■	■	■	C	H	A	N	G	E	O	F	P	A	C	E
M	■	I	■	E	■	R	■	S	■	A	■	R	■	R
I	N	T	E	R	M	I	N	A	B	L	E	■	■	■
S	■	I	■	■	■	D	■	N	■	S	■	A	■	E
H	U	S	B	A	N	D	E	D	■	E	Y	I	N	G
M	■	S	■	C	■	L	■	E	■	H	■	K	■	B
A	S	A	R	U	L	E	■	A	G	O	N	I	S	E
S	■	I	■	T	■	S	■	R	■	O	■	D	■	R
H	I	D	D	E	N	■	U	S	E	D	T	O	I	T

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Action plan Sterilisation will not have an immediate impact. The only way now is penning the dogs. FILE PHOTO

Pen up stray dogs across India

The task should be taken up by the Union and the State governments, and not the local bodies which are short of funds

In 2004, after a dinner near home, I sent back my driver and decided to walk back. I saw a pack of dogs and was lucky to reach the house safely. From then on, I avoided walking at night and started taking a vehicle even for short distances.

After a decade, when I became the Chief Secretary of Andhra Pradesh, a boy was mauled by a pack of dogs in Guntur district. It was not just an isolated incident as such things were happening at regular intervals in various parts of the State, though all of them were not equally gruesome. As the Chief Secretary, I took it up as a focus programme of the government to pen as many street dogs as possible and carry out a large-scale sterilisation programme for them. Simultaneously, clean-up operations around meat shops and other areas were taken up. Unfortunately, unless it is a political programme to which the government in power is committed, an initiative of an officer in a system normally dies with his exit. Same thing happened to this programme as well.

When recently, the Supreme Court took the initiative to order the New Delhi government to ensure all the stray dogs in the national capital are penned within a specific time frame, I felt happy and sad at the same time. Happy because the highest court of the country has recognised a major civic problem and ordered the executive to act. Something similar to how CNG replaced petroleum products in the New Delhi area through a Supreme Court order. I felt sad because essentially a civic issue which should have been addressed by the local authorities a long time ago has to wait for a Supreme Court order for action.

As expected, the elites of the country who never had an occasion to take the footpath and face the attack of dogs have started criticising the court order. Claiming love and consideration for animals, their outcry has attained such a strong intensity that unfortunately, the court has decided to review its order. The elites have a lobby and voice. The common people do not have the luxury of leisure to agitate. I have seen on social media a post suggesting that for rabies, there is a cure and for fear of this infection, stray dogs need not be penned. It is not just the threat of rabies. People have been chased and small children are being mauled by dogs.

The two-month deadline set by the court may not be practical. But there is always an opportunity for the executive to go and explain to the court and get a more realistic time frame. What is actually required is not an order specific to the New Delhi metropolitan area but something that covers the whole country.

Some are suggesting sterilisation as an alternative. If done properly and completely, it will benefit the next generation, not the present. The only way you can save the present generation from stray dog attacks is by penning them.

That gets us to the most important question since this is essentially a task for the local authority. Do the local bodies have enough funds to deal with such a massive problem. I am afraid not. They are not even able to provide the basic necessities such as water and roads, and to expect them to foot the bill of penning of so many stray dogs will be unrealistic. Hence the need for the intervention of the Union and the State governments.

A proper plan initiated at the national level with funding can give a solution. Earlier Finance Commissions used to provide for activity-specific grants which was discontinued by the subsequent commissions. Maybe, the present commission can consider starting such a grant for this purpose.

Stray dogs pose a major civic problem. It needs a mission-mode approach to find a solution. What is lacking is the necessary political will and recognising it as a major national problem.

The hidden hands of discrimination

Akanksha S. Jhajharia
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In an era that prides itself on progress and equality, the stubborn persistence of gender-based oppression remains a stark reminder that true fairness is yet to be achieved. Across metropolises and rural hamlets, societal expectations continue to dictate what it means to be "male" or "female", constraining individual potential and reinforcing outdated hierarchies.

Oppression today does not always wear the face of open violence or denial of rights. More often, it is embedded in the small dismissals that occur daily: the girl steered away from science, the working woman questioned for ambition, the man discouraged from expressing emotion. These are not merely social habits – they are barriers that restrict growth, silence individuality, and pass themselves on through generations with quiet efficiency. Despite growing representation in politics and media, the everyday experience of women, non-binary individuals, and even emotionally expressive men continues to be shaped by subtle bias and silent rules. Wage gaps, low female workforce participation, and gendered roles reflect a deeper cultural malaise: a culture that continues to assign value based on gender rather than merit.

A fair society cannot be built on a foundation where anyone is expected to suppress parts of themselves to belong. Fairness is not about making space at the table for a few; it is about building a table where everyone belongs by default. As long as gender dictates who can rise and who must yield, progress will remain partial. The challenge, then, is not just to empower the oppressed but to reimagine the systems that allow oppression to persist. And perhaps, we must all keep asking – what is fair – until we live in a world where the answer is finally obvious.

Yet even as we continue asking that question, society offers convenient answers, framing equality as mere sameness, progress as the success of a few. That's the danger of appearing equal while remaining unequal: it becomes harder to challenge. The illusion of equality silences dissent, urging people to be grateful rather than just. But gratitude is not a substitute for justice. A society that claims to be equal must first be honest about its inequalities – not just in statistics, but in mindset. Justice begins not in policy, but in perception, and that is where change must begin.

The common thread in longevity

Strong family, social connections, community bonhomie are among the factors leading to a long life

ISTOCK

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vijayacardio@gmail.com

The colour blue is associated with feeling low and also, at the other extreme, with exquisite beauty and a long healthy life. The term "once in a blue moon" refers to transience and rarity, but blue sky and blue mountains give a sense of permanence and stability.

When I started watching birds during the COVID-induced isolation, the days would start with the "kili kili" calls of a blue bird, the white-throated kingfisher, perched prominently on buildings or poles. Birds with blue feathers display different shades depending on the angle of light falling on them. While red, yellow and black colours are caused by specific pigments, there is no naturally occurring blue pigment in fauna. Richard Prum, an American ornithologist, is credited with having discovered a special structural arrangement of keratin in the feathers of birds that look blue. When light falls on stacks of thin layers of keratin with pockets of air, the nano filaments absorb and cancel out all the colours of VIBGYOR, except the blue portion which gets reinforced and reflected. Blue colour in the feathers of birds, on the face of Mandarin monkeys or the bottom of Vervet monkeys is a conjuring act of nature, a play of light, alluring and revealed quietly, without the aplomb of a magician.

Though a birdwatcher at heart, I am a cardiologist by training. The permanence and stability interpretation of the blue colour highlights itself in my professional practice. I am concerned about the rising incidence of heart attacks and strokes, occurring frequently in middle age and snuffing out lives. A solution to curb the illness probably lies in the much talked-about blue zones, where many centenarians lead active and healthy lives and middle age mortality is very low. But blue has nothing to do with longevity. Scientists working on the project happened to mark five zones on a world map with blue ink and the name stuck. More than the etymology of blue zone, I wanted to know about the factors behind the longevity in the study areas – Okinawa in Japan, Icaria in Greece, Sardinia in Italy, Nicoya in Costa Rica, and Loma Linda in the U.S. Common habits found in all the healthy senior citizens were regular physical activity, stress-free attitude, strong family and social connections, a plant-based diet and having a purpose in life. Moderation in food intake and stopping to eat when 80% full is practised. They make it a point to relax with family and friends and enjoy community bonding and bonhomie.

I fondly remember going to the Shanghumugham beach in Thiruvananthapuram with my grandfather. He would take long strides on the beach with his friends. At times, my grandmother would take us to the Padmanabhaswamy temple, where she would talk to other elderly women. Now, many elderly people live by themselves. It is time to pause, talk to each other with eye contact and genuine interest.

All that we see as blue in birds is an optical illusion. The association of blue zones with longevity is mistaken.

That need not stop us from marvelling at the magic of nature and creating our own zones for healthy living and meaningful longevity, in blue or in other colour.

The ways of reading

Skipping sorrow and muting outrage, the younger generation increasingly consumes news tailored to comfort

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Every morning, as I sit with my cup of coffee and open the newspaper, I find myself on an emotional roller coaster. Though the intent is to start the day on a calm note, I often wonder if reading the news truly allows for that any more.

It's nearly impossible to go through even a few pages without being swept up by a wave of emotions. When the Indian team wins a World Cup or brings home more Olympic medals, there's immense joy. But soon after, tragic stories – air crashes, stampedes, accidents – bring sorrow, a sense of loss, and bewilderment at the unpredictability of life.

Reports of horrific crimes stir disgust, and the callous reactions from those in power only deepen the frustration. Politicians switching parties and ideologies with ease leave us wondering at their shameless agility. We sigh, tell ourselves not to expect more, and turn the page.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

A bit of humour follows. A celebrity's antics might make you laugh, and the Amul girl or a sharp cartoon brings a gentle smile. But the mood shifts again – news of crimes against women and children, drug abuse, economic shocks – all stir fear for our loved ones.

Yet, some stories shine through – stories of resilience, kindness, and compassion. These positive stories bring us hope that all is not lost, offering a brief sense of peace in this chaotic world. Still, I see fewer people around me engaging in this ritual. The younger generation scrolls through curated headlines, avoiding the emotional highs and lows that a full newspaper brings.

Skipping sorrow, muting outrage – they consume news tailored to comfort. And then there are the attractive sales ads – whether in print or online – that almost impulsively draw the hand to the mobile phone to place an order, turning the news experience into yet another opportunity for consumption. In this world of filtered content and instant gratification, reading a newspaper page by page is becoming a dying art. It belongs to a generation that still chooses to face the world as it is, not just how we wish it to be.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

The article has delved into the shifting trends in the collectibles industry where the collection of rare antiques has given way to items with contemporary artistic value. ('The curious case of the collectible'; Aug. 17) The designers have given full rein to their innate talents and come up with eye-catching designs that cater to the global market.
C.V. Aravind

The cover story was indeed an informative read. The joint effort by acclaimed Indian artists and internationally renowned designers is undeniably motivating for design lovers and people who collect antique objects. These collectibles add value to our culture, tradition, and rich heritage as each piece has a story of its own, yet to be told to its audience.
Sajna Hameed

The habit of building and preserving collectibles is driven by passion and a desire to carve out a unique niche. This curiosity goes beyond merely acquiring objects — it extends to protecting heritage and telling the stories of the past that might otherwise be forgotten.
S. Raghavan

The article on India's collectibles shows how the market is growing with more people wanting unique and cultural items. But real collectibles gain value not just from being limited editions, but from history, rarity, and tradition. As the article says, if designers mix new ideas with India's craft heritage, it can help artisans and also build lasting cultural value.
M. Barathi

Remembering it right

An objective and comprehensive study of history is essential to cultivate the spirit of enquiry and critical thinking in our youth. ('India in all its messy glory'; Aug. 17) Understanding past events helps societies learn from previous glory and failure. A nuanced study of history can help mould well-rounded individuals endowed with empathy. Kudos to the authors and publishers for making history more accessible to children.
Anusha Pillay

Untold stories

Relentless efforts and infinite sacrifices were made to help India gain independence. ('Forgotten witness'; Aug. 17) And ordinary Indians were the critical cog in the wheel. Over the years, people have forgotten their past. History has a knack of repeating itself, if it is ignored or misunderstood.
Deepak Taak

It was the strength of ordinary Indians that stood behind great leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Bose. The memories of those who can still recall that day should be recorded for posterity as a part of documenting the history of independence.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Rare honour

Felicitation of Rezwan Razak by the International Bank Note Society should inspire others to emulate his passion. ('A nation in notes'; Aug. 17) We are glad to know that he is the first Asian to receive the honour.
V.M. Satvik

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

From the other viewpoint
It's a quiet shift that can prevent friction, heal rifts, and soften hearts
K. Suresh Babu

The quiet beauty of returning
In coming home to the familiar, the mind lowers its guard; its instinct to scan for danger falls quietly silent
Lalit Bhardwaj

Life in a silicon city
The morning air smells of filter coffee; the only thing slower than traffic is Metro construction
Prakash Jothady

Being a southpaw
Besides the snide remarks, one faces diffculties in using scissors, a measuring scale or tape, computer mouse
Sunil V. Furtado

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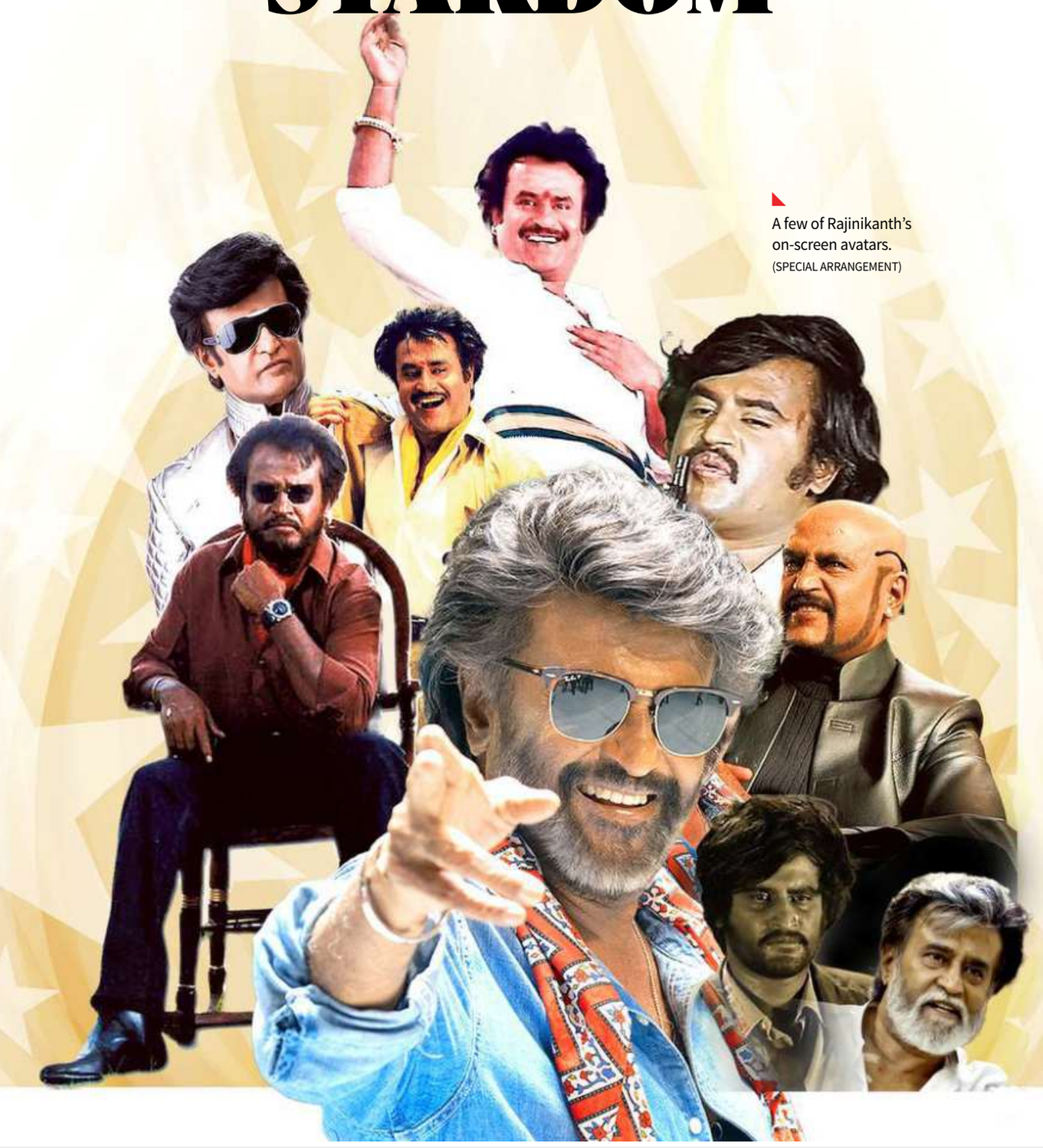
Fifty years on, the actor is still trying on a new persona with each film. But what has changed?

RAJINIKANTH AND THE COST OF STARDOM



A few of Rajinikanth's on-screen avatars. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Sundar Sarukkai

Rajinikanth is worthy of every bit of praise. Surviving, let alone succeeding, 50 years in the Tamil film industry deserves a celebration. But for what specifically? For acting in around 170 films in different languages, his screen charisma, his politics, his impact on the lives of his fans?

Fifty years seems just like yesterday when Rajini's first film, *Apoorva Ragangal* (1975), launched him into history – although he was not the hero. He remade himself to suit the needs of others. His name was changed, he learnt a new language, and put on a new persona that was dictated by filmmaker K. Balachander's vision of what he saw in Rajini.

Five decades ago, he started the journey of becoming a cult figure by legitimising rebellion, making it possible to talk about desires that were taboos, speaking for those who were invisible and on the margins of society, and began the first steps towards fashioning an image of himself. His latest film, *Coolie*, which released last week, commemorates these years. Much has changed, but much remains unchanged. What has not changed is that like back then, he is still trying to put on a new persona, trying to be what he is not.

It is said that the greatest fear of superstars is ageing. While we celebrate their longevity, they seem to live in mortal dread of it. The real life picture of a bald-headed Rajini makes him look like our beloved uncle. In *Coolie*, he has a head full of lush hair and fights like a young man, although his eyes betray him. The same powerful eyes that Balachander commented on 50 years ago now lie hidden in deep sadness, perhaps reflecting the pain that he still has to do films like this in the name of superstardom.

Perfecting the grey figure

Rajini was never defined by his body. He was dark and slight, more like a Bengaluru bus conductor – which he was before he became an actor. He was a Marathi speaker too, who spoke Tamil with a different lilt. Rajini's strength and power came from what he spoke and stood for. He personified a simple but powerful truth: that those who are poor and disadvantaged have a greater moral sensibility than those who possess wealth and power. The vegetable sellers on the pavement, the daily wage earners, the coolies as well as the autorickshaw drivers exhibit far greater moral qualities than do feudal landlords, rich entrepreneurs or powerful leaders.

He was loved because he embodied that grey figure between socially acceptable behaviour and individually regressive one. He could be charming even when he was being politically incorrect. His audience loved him because they knew that he was a moral being at his core.

The coolie theme that was so crassly abused in his new film was one that invoked deep feelings in the working class whose voice he represented in films such as *Mullum Malarum* (1978, a villager in conflict with an urban engineer), *Baasha* (1995, an auto driver), *Muthu* (1995, a servant under a feudal landlord), and more recently, in Pa. Ranjith's hit film *Kaala* (2018) where he fights for slum dwellers. The younger Rajini acted like an older man, wiser, responsible, more socially attuned, and one who produced hope.

Moral ambiguities

Fifty years on, Rajini's morality has aged. He is not able to hide this even if he succeeds in camouflaging the ageing of his body. When he played a gangster in *Thalapathi* (1991), there was a sense of moral code in the world of criminals. But in *Coolie*, Rajini's moral sense disappears when he joins a young woman in a criminal act to justify making money to pay the fees for the medical education of the woman's sisters. He is not the Rajini that we saw in *Bhairavi* (1978) or movies like *Aval Appadithan* (1978), which catalysed a larger discussion on women's rights and roles in a society.

Rajini was as famous for his dialogues as for his cigarette tricks because those dialogues did not age. They did not need an old man, trying to look young with a mop of hair, to deliver them. Rajini converted these dialogues in movies such as *Arunachalam* (1997), *Baasha* and *Padayappa* (1999), into social slogans.

As long as Rajini speaks for the rights of the oppressed and the marginalised, his physical age does not matter. Being old is exhibited not in the way we walk or fight, but in the way we think, in the energy we have to fight for the benefit of others, and in the hope that we bring.

Rajini, while still physically explosive on the screen, has aged mentally and morally, at least in his last few films. He seems to have lost the qualities that made him perennially young and relevant. We can't blame him. Perhaps he has become indifferent and tired. Just like us.

The Bengaluru-based writer and philosopher's new novel is titled Water Days.

Visitors interacting with MAP's exhibition and *The Writing Table* installation; (below) an artwork by Bhuri Bai at KIAL. (JAGATH NARAYANAN)

LEANING INTO TECH AND THE TACTILE

At Bengaluru's Museum of Art & Photography, there's space for those addicted to smartphones and those who'd like to switch off and be present

Joshua Muyiwa

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a new-age museum in our smartphone era must create perfect selfie spots. Over the past decade, founders, architects, exhibition designers, curators and artists have had to also imagine their works and spaces to double up as Instagram backdrops. At Bengaluru's Museum of Art & Photography (MAP), however, this isn't at their "core of building a museum-going culture", says Abhishek Poddar, the founder of this museum. "At MAP, these interactive elements, whether analogue or digital, are always intentional choices, not add-ons."

Accommodating this buzzing social media landscape isn't kowtowing; museums need footfalls too. It is MAP's mode of engaging with these amorphous, captive channels of communication and building community that marks them out. "It's not something that we prioritise from the very start of conceptualising an exhibition, but it is also something that we've come to consider in the process of executing it. It's the way the world works, and museums and their shows can't be entirely safe from that," explains Arnika Ahldag, director of exhibitions and curation at MAP. "But it's good when it does happen."

She points to the example of *The Writing Table* installation at the recently-opened exhibition titled *Shape of a Thought: Letters from Ram Kumar*. This wooden desk and chair arrangement is stacked with the short-fiction collections and other writings by the artist, loose sheafs of blank paper, pens and pencils. Visitors can draw inspiration from the artist's preoccupations and write a letter to themselves, loved ones, strangers or even the city. Once done, they can clip it to the twine strung above the desk like festive buntings. "The initial idea was to find a way for visitors to connect with the physical act of letter-writing," Ahldag says. "But this is the element from *Shape of a Thought* that has become the most shared on social media; and that's good with us because it has become yet another way for people to experience, connect and feel Ram Kumar's practice."

The modernist writer-painter's letters can be experienced through multiple formats – facsimile, audio, Indian Sign Language, translations, transcripts, Braille and in regional languages through guided walks. These different layers that invite interaction "gives a larger group of people the opportunity to get to know his works and thoughts; it allows for them to respond through the medium they're most comfortable in", says Poddar. "If they like big screens, we have digitally-stored exhibitions, if they prefer games, we have games. The idea is to simply start them on the journey to embracing and appreciating art."

Breaking down the abstract

Since opening in 2023, MAP and its teams have understood that audiences expect more than frames of artwork hung on a wall and being declared as great art. Instead, MAP has been able to channel our obsession with smartphones while also accounting for our desires to switch off and be tactile in our environments. "The experience of something has become more and more important," shares Ahldag. For instance, abstract art is commonly perceived as something that's intimidating. "It's got a reputation of being only for those in-the-know or seasoned connoisseurs." In order to address this notion, their exhibitions are put together to "build a relationship between the artist and the audience", she explains. In the Ram Kumar exhibit, there are prompts in the form of questions on brown text panels next to each of the abstract paintings that might coax different entry-points into the visual for the viewer. This is an extension of their *Family Label* activity that allows visitors to look at the artworks and create a label on what they think artwork means.

Ahldag has found that when these kinds of invitational interventions are "created in connection with an exhibition, people seem to be more interested". While the inclusion of tactile art work in MAP exhibitions is an accessibility feature, an integral tenet of MAP's outreach to have people across abilities gain access to art, "they've also become a way for the general public to experience art with different senses". And though digital experiences at the museum are cutting-edge, Ahldag and her exhibitions team have found "that older ideas like a reading station or an activity desk have worked well" to build MAP's public.

"Over the opening weekend, *The Writing Table* turned out to be a hit with visitors and we've already collected handwritten letters of gratitude, dedications and love the size of a thick book," she tells me. For us [at the museum], it's sweet that we've become a third space in the city for visitors to slow down a bit, spend time on an activity that isn't immediately converted into a product – these are the intangibles we want to be able to share with our visitors," she concludes.

Shape of a Thought *is on till October 26.*

MAP @ the KIAL

A customised version of MAP's technological interventions now exists at Terminal 2 of Bengaluru's Kempegowda International Airport, an upgrade from the earlier museum shop. At the outposts in the Domestic and International terminals, they have their Gallery on Demand, where travellers can browse the works of Indian artists such as Jamini Roy, Jyoti Bhatt and Suresh Punjabi or search through the museum's entire digitised collection and even email them to one's self or friends. There are puzzles created using artworks to pass the time. Scan a QR code to digitally light a lamp: choose a lamp from different genres of arts and artists and type out your name to ignite the flame.

At the International Terminal, those transiting can also enjoy an exhibition titled *Bhuri Bai: My Life as an Artist*. It traces the practice of the Padma Shri award-winning Bhil painter, muralist, and illustrator. It starts from the early 1980s to her more recent large-scale commissioned works. Scan another QR code, and you'll be able to access an audio guide that aims to enhance your experience of these vibrant artworks. "We want people to experience Indian art and the seed for that can be planted even when they are using screens. It's been an attempt to cultivate the belief that our history and culture aren't boring things inside museums, but an exciting shared inheritance," Poddar states.

The writer and poet is based in Bengaluru.